

## Lesson 2

# Major Idea and Supporting Details

A **major idea** is the most important idea in a paragraph or a group of paragraphs in a longer informational text. Sometimes an author states a major idea directly. Sometimes you have to figure it out from the details. To determine the major idea, ask yourself what the passage is about. Often, the major idea is a general statement that sums up the passage. **Supporting details** are the details in a passage that support, or tell more about, the major idea. These details are often facts, examples, or quotations.



### Tips for Success

- Determine the most important point of a selection.
- Make sure you know what the major idea is before deciding whether a detail supports it.

As you read this passage from *The Sea Around Us* by Rachel Carson, look for the major idea and supporting details.

The sea transforms climate. And how completely it does so is strikingly seen in the differences between the Arctic and the Antarctic.

The Arctic is a sea almost closed in by land; the Antarctic is a continent surrounded by ocean. The ice-covered Antarctic is in the grip of high winds that blow outward from the land. They ward off any warming influence that might otherwise come to the continent from the sea. So the Antarctic is a bitterly cold land. Here and there over the snow is the red dust of very small and simple plant cells. Mosses hide from the wind in the valleys and crevices. But of the higher plants only a few skimpy strands of grasses have managed to find a foothold. . . .

Contrast with this the summers of the Arctic! Its flat, treeless plains are bright with many-colored flowers. Everywhere except on the Greenland icecap and some arctic islands, summer is warm enough for plants to grow. They pack a year's growth into the short, warm arctic summer. The limit of plant life toward the poles is set not by latitude, but by the sea. For the influence of the warm Atlantic is borne far up into the Arctic, making it in climate as well as geography a world apart from the Antarctic.

1. Which statement BEST describes the major idea of this passage?
  - A. The sea transforms climate.
  - B. The Antarctic is a continent surrounded by ocean.
  - C. The animals of the Antarctic are birds, a wingless mosquito, and flies.
  - D. The Greenland icecap and some arctic islands are not warm enough in summer for plants to grow.

1. (A) (B) (C) (D)



Mark your answer choice by filling in the oval.

Now check to see whether you chose the correct answer.

- A. This is the correct answer. It states the major idea of the passage.
- B. This statement applies only to the Antarctic.
- C. This statement is a detail that supports the major idea.
- D. This statement is another example of a supporting detail.

**Test Practice**

As you read this passage from *The Amazing Universe* by astronomer Herbert Friedman, think about its major idea and supporting details.

To begin a description of our amazing universe, we must try to appreciate its vast scale. "Try" is the right word, for astronomical distances are so great that it is extremely difficult—with our everyday, human concepts of time and space—to sense them at all. Because of the immensities involved, astronomers find a convenient measure in the speed of light: 186,282 miles a second.

A ray of light travels from moon to earth in slightly more than a second, so the earth-moon distance—240,000 miles—can be expressed as about 1.3 light-seconds. The 93 million miles from sun to earth is the equivalent of 8.3 light-minutes. A light-year, the astronomical measure commonly used, is about *six trillion* miles.

Since today's rockets never achieve more than a small fraction of the speed of light, space travel requires about three days to the moon, two years to Jupiter, and 15 years to Pluto. To reach the nearest star, Alpha Centauri, at a distance of 4.3 light-years, would take nearly 100,000 years!

Stand out of doors in the country on a clear night and look up: Without a magnifying lens you can see several thousand stars. A pair of binoculars will bring into view perhaps 50,000. If you have a two-inch telescope, the number leaps to several hundred thousand. The current estimate is that our galaxy, the Milky Way, contains about 200 billion stars, many of them in clusters of hundreds of thousands.

1. (A) (B) (C) (D)  
2. (A) (B) (C) (D)

1. What is the major idea of this passage?
- A. Our galaxy contains hundreds of billions of stars.
  - B. The size of the universe makes space travel impractical.
  - C. Most of the galaxy is not visible, even to astronomers with telescopes.
  - D. The vast size of our universe is almost impossible to grasp.

2. Which of these details BEST supports the major idea of the passage?
- A. A light-year is about six trillion miles.
  - B. Our galaxy contains about 200 billion stars.
  - C. A ray of light travels from moon to earth in just over a second.
  - D. The galaxy takes the form of a disk with a bulge at the center.

3. Write a sentence that states the main idea of the last paragraph.

---

---

---